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Media reach early verdict in Pope shooting

By DOROTHY RABINOWITZ

FOR the prosecution at the just-opened trial of accused conspirators against the life of John Paul II, the news has not been good: or so we are informed.

Commentators have already been able to determine, on the basis of the first two days, that prospects for the prosecution are bleak. And Tom Brokaw actually announced, on the NBC Nightly News, that, as a result of Mehmet Ali Agca's courtroom behavior, the prosecution's case had been "all but shot down."

Now it is not often (much less at a trial having the significance of this one) that we are privileged to have so decisive a verdict on the prosecution's case after but two days: the press verdict, to be sure, not the jury's.

The last time, in fact, that we witnessed such a speedy interment of a case for the prosecution was in the year 1981: the case in question, not coincidentally, was the very one that has just come to trial in Rome.

That was the time, remember, when, in the face of much evidence to the contrary, Agca was presented as simply a right-wing Turkish "nationalist" with fascist connections: the time when the overwhelming evidence put together by author Claire Sterling as well as Paul Henze (a former CIA man) that the Pope's assailant had been bankrolled by a connecting chain of Bulgarian officials — and that the attempted murder of the Pope, in fact, bore all the earmarks of Kremlin involvement — evoked mainly silence, if not outright incredulousness.

There were exceptions to this behavior, to be sure, among them the NBC special broadcast by Marvin Kalb, which gave compelling evidence of a Kremlin-directed plot on the Pope's life.

On the whole, however, the reaction of journalists, news producers and general commentators was better exemplified by the ABC special detailing the improbability of any thesis holding that there had been a plot against the Pope in which the KGB had been involved.

And who can forget the New York Times editorial which bade Americans who might actually go so far as to examine the evidence of a Soviet government plot of this kind to "avoid excessive sanctimony."

For, as the Times editorial went on to say, a United States President — Dwight Eisenhower, no less — had one way or another been responsible for the 1960 assassination of Patrice Lumumba, president of the Congo.

It was the editorialist's view, that is, that President Eisenhower (whose syntax, we will be the first to admit, was not the best, but whose general clarity had managed nicely to carry him through a war as commander-in-chief) had inadvertently conveyed to aides a wish that Lumumba be assassinated.

Americans, therefore, "should be the first to understand," the Times observed, if Yuri Andropov's "people" — as they were so interestingly referred to here — became mired for similar reasons in a sleazy conspiracy (to kill the Pope) that was no part of Andropov's intentions.

This distinguished theory notwithstanding — and notwithstanding, either, resistance from a suddenly cautious CIA — the growing accumulation of evidence pointed unmistakably to a KGB-Bulgarian plot: an accumulation sufficiently effective that readers of the New York Times woke one day to find prominently displayed on the front pages of that paper a report unequivocally attesting to the reality of a plot.

It is now four years since the attempt on the Pope's life, a period in which the case implicating Bulgarian officials, acting at the Soviet behest, was put together.

This is the case which, it is being suggested now, is undermined, has been "shot down": assertions made because the prosecution's main witness, Agca, has been behaving like a mad person, announcing himself to be Jesus Christ resurrected, and otherwise disturbing the proceedings.

To hold this view on the basis of three days' testimony is to ignore the evidence so painstakingly compiled since 1981: compiled, moreover, by Italy's most eminent jurists, who put the case together after extraordinarily wide-ranging investigations — not of Agca alone, but of every link in the chain of his associations, every detail of his story *and* of theirs.

It is to ignore the 20,000 pages of evidence through which the prosecutors sifted — for 23 months — before coming to their conclusions: conclusions on which those jurists staked proud reputations.

The merits of the case so investigated — and by such investigators — cannot now rise or fall on the question of Mehmet Ali Agca's sanity.

That this is, nevertheless, exactly the view prevailing in the reportage coming out of Rome this week should tell how enduring, still, is the strength of that wish to deny — after all that we have seen and learned — what it is that Yuri Andropov's (or Gorbachev's) "people" are, in fact, capable of doing.

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